

49 when the war began, she volunteered as a medical intern in France and was later awarded a bronze medal. War service brought her a level of professional honor she would never receive at home.

The first all-women's medical unit to go abroad was the Women's Oversea Hospitals which was supported by the National American Woman Suffrage Association. A report on the female medical unit's arrival indicated that the surgeons were astonished to find only women. "Women surgeons!" they roared in indignation. But then wounded men arrived so fast that there was no time to think of "men people" or "women people," just of human needs. The women proved their worth, and months later, the director Dr. Finley reported, "We are now...doing regular military surgery." Additional hospital units followed, including a unit dedicated to treating soldiers injured by gas warfare.

The largest all women's medical group was the American Women's Hospitals (AWH), founded by the Medical Women's National Association in 1917. Their first hospital opened in France in July 1918 under the direction of Dr. Barbara Hunt. During its first year, AWH registered more than 1000 women physicians. By Nov 1918, they had sent 78 women physicians overseas to work in hospitals, dispensaries, and ambulance units in collaboration with groups, like the American Red Cross, the American Fund for French Wounded, and the American Committee for Devastated France.

Women physicians also found other ways to contribute to the war effort. Dr. Marguerite Cockett co-founded an ambulance unit driven by women and helped establish one of the first YMCA canteens for American troops. The Smith College Relief Unit was composed of alumnae, including two physicians, Dr. Alice Weld Tallant and Dr. Maude Kelly. As volunteers, they engaged in civilian relief work and were referred to by villagers as the "good American Ladies of Grécourt."

The number of women physicians who served at home and abroad is impossible to estimate. A prevailing sense of patriotism and desire to be of service fueled their commitment. Perhaps Dr. Olga Stastny summed it up best, "I want to get to France, even if I have to scrub floors."

The war ended on November 11, 1918. Though the armistice was signed, women recognized that their work was far from over. Many remained overseas to help rebuild Europe in the post-war period. These are the unsung heroes of World War I – women physicians with capabilities equal to their male colleagues who were not granted the same military privilege. Despite these barriers, they made lasting contributions both during the war and in the years that followed.

"The faces of these poor people have changed in expression since our visits. They say not only has America come to their aid in the war, but she has sent her women to help the civilian population."

-- Dr. Alice Barlow Brown

Learn more about the work of women physicians in World War I in an exhibition and short film by the American Medical Women's Association (AMWA). www.amwa-doc.org/wwi-exhibition.

Postscript:

It was not until 1943, with the passage of the Sparkman-Johnson Bill during World War II, that women physicians would become commissioned officers of the military.

More than 100 years after the war, the American Women's Hospitals Service continues to answer the call for aid from around the world. This charitable arm of AMWA helps fund clinics in underserved areas, trainees who work abroad in those regions, and community projects that address needs within the U.S. We welcome your support.

For over a century, the American Medical Women's Association has sought to advance women in medicine and improve women's health. We achieve this by providing and developing leadership, advocacy, education, expertise and mentoring and through building strategic alliances. Join us as we host the Centennial Congress of the Medical Women's International Association in New York, July 2019. amwa-doc.org